

# Mind the Gaps:

*Assessing the Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia*

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# Structure:



A Southeast Asian/ smaller-state perspective:

- 1. Mind the GAPS**
- 2. Geopolitical implications**
- 3. China-backed railway projects in SE Asia**
  - Lure (and limit) of Chinese power in the era of connectivity

# Mind the GAPS



## GAPS:

Perceptual, Political, and Developmental

- **Big-power *push*, small-state *pull***
- ***National dynamics, sub-national imperatives***
  - \* Connectivity projects at subnational and local levels
  - \* (All politics is local); “**All development is local**”
- **Dilemma of diversification:**

Any (credible and feasible) **alternative** please?

# Geopolitical Implications

- The power dynamics behind the constructions of railroads, highways, dams, ports, pipelines, etc.



## ■ Infrastructure development as a new geopolitical chessboard

-- Big power competition is a key driver of the current wave of connectivity-building across the region

## ■ Institutionalizing influence:

-- China-led institutions as the 3rd pillar of Asian architecture?

## ■ The *lure* and *limit* of Chinese power

# Competing Initiatives

for infrastructure development in Asia

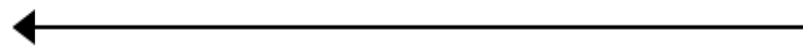


- **China’s “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI):**
  - (Not a single policy) an umbrella cooperative framework: (a) promoted primarily through *infrastructure and other connectivity-building*; (b) *pursued bilaterally*; (c) *shaped by subnational and national dynamics* between both sides
- **Japan’s “Partnership for Quality Infrastructure”**
- **Emerging initiatives:** Quad, US’ Indo-Pacific infrastructure initiative, EU’s Connectivity Strategy

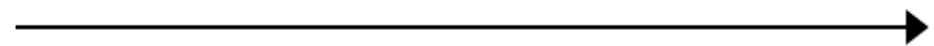
	Organizing Principles	Power Relations
<b>1<sup>st</sup> Pillar</b> - U.S.-led alliances	<b>Collective defense</b> - Threat-based	- Asymmetric bilateralism - U.S.-dominated ( <b>U.S. Plus</b> )
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Pillar</b> - ASEAN-led multilateralism	<b>Cooperative security</b> - Norms-based ( <i>the ASEAN Way</i> )	- Sovereign equality - Centered and “led” by weaker states ( <b>ASEAN Plus</b> )
<b>Emerging 3<sup>rd</sup> Pillar?</b> - China-centered initiatives	<b>“Common destiny”</b> - Remunerative-based, leveraging on <i>geography</i> and a common need for development	- “Interdependence” (or uneven dependency?) - China-centered ( <b>China Plus</b> )
<b>Emerging 4<sup>th</sup> Pillar?</b> - Japan/Quad-anchored initiatives	<b>“Quality partnership”</b> - Value-based, promoting a synthesis between <i>high-quality</i> infrastructure, environment, and sustainable growth	- Expanded partnerships for “free & open Indo-Pacific” strategies

**Figure 1:  
DEVELOPMENTAL DIVIDEND-DEFICIT SPECTRUM**

<b>SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT</b> and Transformation of Economic Structure	<b>Developmental Dividends</b>		<b>Developmental Deficits</b>		<b>UNSUSTAINABLE DEPENDENCY</b> and Degradation of Economic Structure & Environment
	<i>Integrated infra- structure development</i>	<i>Employment &amp; human capital enhancement</i>	<i>Resource Mobilization (between utilization &amp; depletion)</i>	<i>Unemploy- ment or human capital degradation</i>	



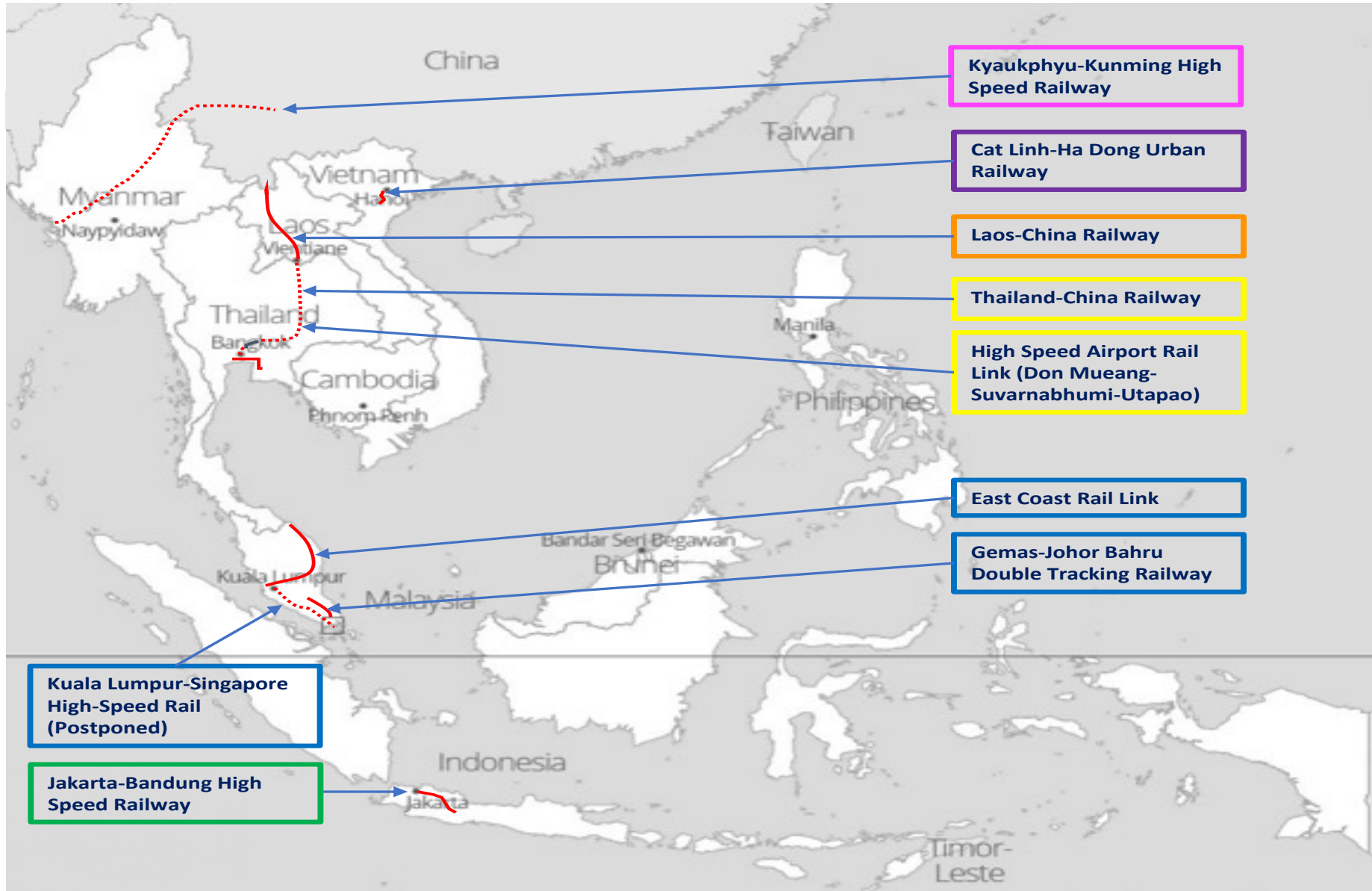
Degree of Development Multiplication



Degree of Development Depletion

# The “lines” on the BRI map

## China-related Rail Projects in Southeast Asia





# Rivers of Iron: Railroads and Chinese Power in Southeast Asia





# ECRL, THE NEW DEAL

**640km**  
Length of alignment

Service provided:  
**Passenger and freight**

**December 2026**  
Completion Date

**14** Passenger stations  
**1** Freight station  
**5** Combined passenger and freight stations

**160kph** Passenger train  
**80kph** Freight train

**3** Interchange stations  
• Mentakab with KTMB  
• Bangi with KTMB  
• Putrajaya with ERL/MRT

**Stimulate**  
Economic Development along the ECRL Corridor

**CONSTRUCTION DETAILS FOR PHASES 1 AND 2**

The original cost per kilometre was **RM98m** but has now been reduced to **RM68m**

The link will be slightly shorter, but remain as a double-track line.

Original cost of the project was **RM65.5b**, and would have seen the government saddled with a **RM130b** debt under the earlier terms and conditions.

The new cost of construction of Phases 1 and 2 is **RM44b**, a reduction of **RM21.5b**

- New proposed stations
- New proposed track
- Previously proposed stations
- Previously proposed track
- KTM track

